

SYMPHONY REVIEW
Symphonic Poems in Oakland
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By Thomas Goss

The premiere of Michael Fiday's *Automotive Passacaglia* with the Oakland East Bay Symphony Friday night was exceptional. Originally scored for piano and percussion, this transcription for orchestra was organic in texture, textural in conception. Only occasionally did its gleaming, spare bones surface amidst the lushly scored passages and the integrated play of the instrumental choirs.

Orchestral transcription is a tricky thing. At its happiest, the transformed works feel entirely orchestral in conception, making the piano originals a distant memory. Prime examples are Debussy's setting of Satie's first and third *Gymnopédies*, portions of *Petrouchka* (originally scored by Stravinsky for two pianos), and Ravel's many transcriptions of his own piano works and those of others: *Ma Mère L'Oye*, *Alborado del Gracioso*, *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, and the titanic transfiguration of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

But for every such triumph, there are at least two failures. Most prominent is *Les Sylphides*, a potpourri of Chopin pieces set as ballet. The choreography scintillates, the orchestrations do not. Several orchestrators, including Glazunov himself, tried and failed to make this entirely pianistic music sing for strings, wind, and brass. Another harsh lesson is Ravel's transcription of his own *Une Barque sur l'Océan*. Its piano original is quintessential Ravel. The orchestrated version sounds like second-rate *La Mer*.

"The Art of the Suspenseful Plink"

The opening of Fiday's piece was a study in the art of the suspenseful plink, calling to mind the scores of Lalo Schifrin and other cinematic heart-in-mouth pioneers — but with a twist. Plunks in xylophone, glockenspiel, and marimba rounded and swelled, merging with long tones in strings and winds. When suspense could no longer abide itself, spooky, nervous riffing chased its fugal tail back and forth across the orchestral palette, with the occasional train wreck of Bartók hitting gamelan.

A brilliant antiphonal episode between horns and brass mutated and evolved into a heavily syncopated groove that felt at times like the dahs and dits of Morse code. A big, tensely constructed finale tied all moods together in a soupy wash of bravura, drums rumbling and rolling under the motorism like an earthquake, before the sudden recurrence of strangely static plink left us high and unbearably dry.

The other standout among standouts was the performance of Carl Nielsen's Violin Concerto, with Israeli-born Leor Maltinski as soloist. This concerto is often avoided by even the finest concertizers for its extreme difficulty and quirkiness, and it was sorely neglected in the days of

Nielsen's obscurity. But this most deserving work found an appropriate home with audience, violinist, and orchestra, proving you can't keep a good work down.

Maltinski hit it just right, avoiding false sentiment or an overly clinical approach. If anything, his playing allowed the warmth and honesty of the underlying folk traditions of the music to shine through. Maltinski's large sound and precision might easily have dominated the proceedings, but he showed a mature and engaging awareness of the orchestra, reaching out and involving the other musicians in his explorations. The warm, sincere smile shared between Maltinski and concertmaster Nathan Rubin in a chance moment was infectious. This was an honest moment of musical joy.

The Nielsen is not so much a traditional concerto as it is the marriage of two distinct *Konzertstücke* under the same title. As proof of this was the audience's inability to restrain from applauding between the two movements, as if the punctuation of approbation were built into the score. The length, intensity of development, and technical flash all made the first movement feel a complete exercise in itself.

Full of Wit and Pathos, Never Flagging

Yet this exhausted the soloist not a whit. He gave himself as thoroughly to the complex second movement, playing tag with the interlacing wind lines, orating the recitante passages between *gruff tutti* exclamations, and allowing the wit as well as the pathos to come through. I could say that he had the broadness of tone of Ricci and the sensitivity of Shlomo Mintz, but these are comparisons of degree only. This striking talent cannot truly be likened to these legends. He has the good fortune to sound exactly like himself.

Both Fiday's *Passacaglia* and Nielsen's concerto were poetic and loose enough in structure to help make the evening's title of "Symphonic Poems" more than wishful thinking. The concert was bookended by two truly forged examples of this idiom, Franz Liszt's *Les Preludes* and Richard Strauss' *Till Eulenspiegel*. In the first, the OEB was joined onstage by the Oakland Youth Orchestra.

Among the six score musicians were over 80 string players, the junior of which displayed remarkable evenness of tone and depth of expression in Liszt's playful masterpiece. The score was well executed by all, with only an occasional hesitancy of line or crack of embouchure, and conducted by Michael Morgan with consistency and flair. However, it showed that fulfilling the daydreamed yearnings of the super-Romantics for a mass orchestra was perilous to their music. Much of the delicacy was lost in thickness of tone, and Liszt's approach to string writing came out blocky where it should have been subtle.

If Maestro Morgan has an outstanding trait as a conductor, it is that of getting out of the way of the music and letting it be what it wants to be. Nowhere was this more evident and serendipitous than in the concluding portrayal of *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks* by orchestral painter supreme Richard Strauss. Some tone poems by this and other composers are concertos for orchestra. This piece is a veritable stand-up comedy routine for orchestra if done right, which it was. The single reeds were sassy and klutzy, the muted trumpets coarse and

garish, the flutes and double reeds snickering, all in keeping with the nonsensical donkey-like theme. Percussionist and obnoxious-sounding instrument specialist Ward Spangler was at his best on ratchet and snare rolls, playing off the antics of clarinetists Diane Maltester and Laurel Hall. Morgan left us with a boom and a laugh.